

A Letter to our P A R T N E R S:

Let's Give Students and Teachers Time

Vicki Phillips, Director of Education, College Ready

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 @drvickip

 www.linkedin.com/in/drvickip

Dear partners:

As the school year comes to a close and we have a chance to reflect on the successes and challenges of the past nine months, I wanted to write to you about our work together to make sure the Common Core State Standards help teachers prepare their students for success. It's been inspiring this past year to hear from teachers and educators in many states and school districts who are excited about the standards and the new lessons and materials they've been able to develop. Some are already seeing clear advances from their students.



An assistant superintendent in a Kentucky school district wrote to tell me that “reading and writing scores have increased across the board in our middle and high school.... We see results not only in classroom visits, but on our state assessment, which is based on the common core.”

It is especially thrilling to hear about these students' gains because we know they're performing against rigorous standards. They're taught to analyze and apply information, not just gather it and remember it. They're encouraged to ask questions, solve problems, and think for themselves; they are becoming strong learners who can succeed in college or career; and they are gaining the skills they need to be good citizens in a democratic society. Every student needs and deserves the same gains the students are getting in that school district. And they need it now. Every year is precious. The common core is an urgent cause.

But even the best new ideas aren't self-fulfilling; they have to be put into practice wisely. That's especially true when it comes to using assessment scores as a factor in student or teacher evaluations.

The Gates Foundation is an ardent supporter of fair teacher feedback and evaluation systems that include measures of student gains. We don't believe student assessments should ever be the *sole* measure of teaching performance, but evidence of a teacher's impact on student learning should be part of a balanced evaluation that helps all teachers learn and improve.

At the same time, no evaluation system will work unless teachers believe it is fair and reliable, and it's very hard to be fair in a time of transition. The standards need time to work. Teachers need time to develop lessons, receive more training, get used to the new tests, and offer their feedback. Applying assessment scores to evaluations before these pieces are developed would be like measuring the speed of a runner based on her time – without knowing how far she ran, what obstacles were in the way, or whether the stopwatch worked!

Over the past seven years, we've had the privilege of working with extraordinary educators doing pioneering work to advance our common goals - improving student achievement with a focus on those students most in need. As I've talked with our partners over this past year, I have heard over and over again their wholehearted support for the Common Core *and* their very real anxiety about the challenges that come with change. The teachers' anxiety is understandable: A rushed effort to apply the assessments could punish teachers as they're trying new things, and any hiccups in the assessments could be seen as flaws in the standards.

That's why the Gates Foundation agrees with those who've decided that *assessment results should not be taken into account in high-stakes decisions on teacher evaluation or student promotion* for the next two years, during this transition.

A number of states, including Kentucky, Maryland, Colorado and Louisiana have provided additional time for teachers to create their own lessons and curriculum, get new professional support, and become familiar with the assessments before they're used as a measure of teacher performance. Each of these states is taking a different approach, but they all are listening to teachers, and they are all taking steps to align their approach with what teachers need to make the standards succeed.

Common-core aligned assessments play a crucial role in delivering on the standards' promise. They measure students' abilities in critical thinking and problem solving. They will give teachers, parents and students the information they need to improve learning. They're an indispensable part of the Common Core, and they're undergoing a careful practice run right now.

It's valuable for students to actually take the Common Core-aligned tests without consequences during this period, so that teachers can get familiar with the tests, have a chance to offer their feedback, and get a feel for the students' successes and challenges. It is an important part of the process of arriving at fair and reliable tests.

Including the assessment results in teacher evaluations even though they won't count for two years also has benefits: First, the teachers can begin to use the assessments to inform their practice, and second, teachers can see how their performance looks using these measures and make sure it lines up with other measures of teaching practice. This is crucial in building teacher trust in the assessments.

In our view, allowing two years in which assessments will be administered and scored but not yet taken into account strikes the best balance between a commitment to teacher evaluations that measure student learning and a commitment to ensure that teachers will not be harmed as they complete the transition to the Common Core.

Under this approach, teachers get the time, tools and support they need to teach the new standards, and students have a chance to get used to the new tests. This can ensure that students receive the high-quality instruction that will get them ready for life -- and can track their growth as they go. That would fulfill the goals of the Common Core: to promote the opportunity that is the purpose of our public schools. At a time when economic inequality is rising and social mobility is falling, the Common Core is the best way to keep faith with the American Dream.

Let's take the time needed to get it right.

Onward!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Vicki".